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### Ohio State Engineer

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# The Engineer's Bookshelf . . .

By WILSON R. DUMBLE

THE review of Miss Betty Smith's first novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, published in The Bookshelf this month, is written by Cpl. James H. Labadie, a member of the A.S.T.P. Engineering group now on our campus. While here, Cpl. Labadie is quartered in Canfield Hall; he is a native of Ottawa, Ohio, and a former student at Reed College. He received his basic training at Camp Perry.

Cpl. Labadie's review of the novel was written as part of the regular Army English 111 course during the Summer Quarter; and the janitor of The Bookshelf hopes that other book reviews by more visiting Army men will appear here during the course of the year. The janitor is happy to have this splendid assistance.

## A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

Reviewed by CPL. JAMES H. LABADIE

I have often and vainly asked, "What is this thing called Brooklyn?" The question has been given its most satisfactory answer to date in this new book by Betty Smith. There has long been need of a book that would capture the spirit of the justly famed borough; previous novels have been unsatisfactory—they have for the most part been written in a more or less apologetic vein, and have achieved their effectiveness chiefly through the use of page after page of profanity. Such works have given a view that was by no means uninteresting, but certainly not true. The picture has been further distorted by the legend of "dem bums" and the goils and pernts of the radio comedians. Thus there has been a need for clearing up these misconceptions by presenting life as it is lived in Brooklyn. Such a book would of necessity be largely autobiographical, and would require both keen insight and a prodigious memory for mood and detail.

This need has been fulfilled admirably by Miss Smith. She grew up in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn during the period of which she writes (roughly 1906-1918), and she had her eyes open! Her book is richly peopled with some of the most colorful characters I have encountered in a long time. Although described by the publishers as a novel, "*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*" is rather a series of sketches from the life of Francie Nolan, who also grew up in Brooklyn during the first two decades of the present century.

Francie Nolan's heritage included much of the sheer toughness which the children of the poor must have if they were to survive in the streets

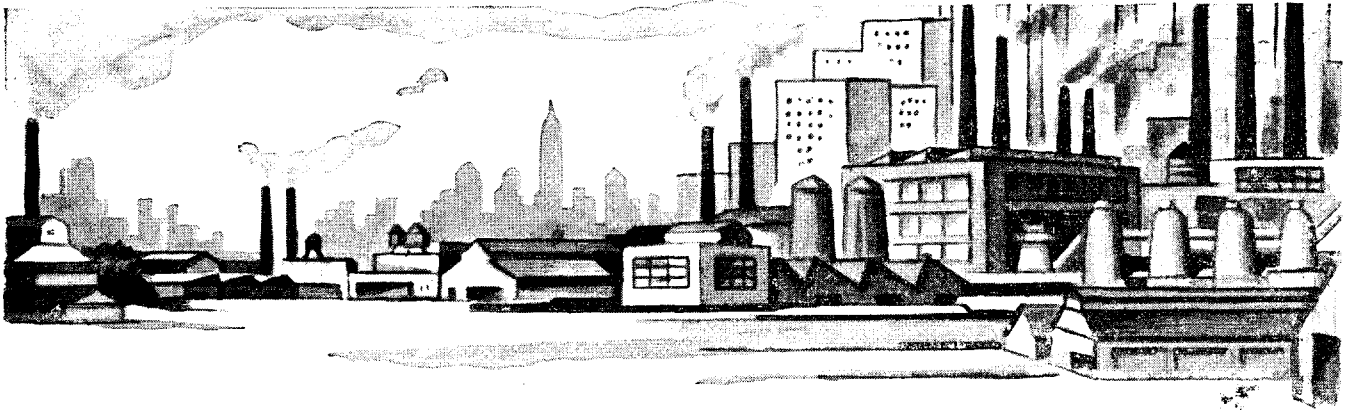
of Brooklyn. Although she did not have her father's good looks, she did inherit the mysticism and wonder of countless generations of life-loving Irish. Her Austrian grandmother, old Mary Rommely, had given her the almost supernatural good sense of the middle-European peasant.

We first meet Francie on a Saturday afternoon in summer, the most wonderful time of the most wonderful day in her week. Saturday is the day on which Francie and her younger brother Neeley take their week's find of rags, paper and tin cans to Carney, the junk dealer. Carney generously adds a penny to the small reward of any little girl who does not jump when he pinches her cheek. (When, some years later, he pinches something else, Francie decides that she is becoming a woman and is too old to collect junk.) After the pennies have been carefully spent on not very good candy, eleven-year-old Francie returns home where she helps her mother. Katie Nolan, who is thirty-one but looks much younger, cleans all the flats in their tenement in order to assure the family of at least a place to live. For Francie's father, a singing waiter when he works, is a very bad provider. But he is the greatest man in Francie's life.

On Saturday afternoon Francie reads a book. In fact, she reads a book every day of this summer. Her choice of reading matter is completely without prejudice—she is reading every book in the library, selected alphabetically according to author, and is now in the B's. Seated on the fire-escape in the late afternoon, Francis watches older girls in the nearby tenements as they wash and dress in preparation for Saturday night's activities. The sight fills her with delight and a deep envy. Some day, maybe, she herself will be standing at the kitchen sink, making herself ready for a glorious Saturday night with a man like her father. This man will truly admire her, however, rather than just go out with her for want of anything better to do, as seems to be the case with most of the neighborhood romances.

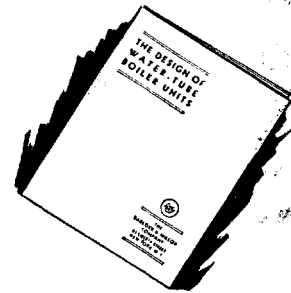
Later parts of the book trace the marriage of Johnny and Katie, who took the handsome, lovable Irishman away from her best friend before she even knew what she was doing. The responsibilities of children, added to his burden with surprising rapidity, have made Johnny so sadly aware of his failure as a breadwinner that he must find solace in alcohol in order to forget his sinful neglect. Of course when he drinks no saloon-keeper

(Continued on page 30)



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## THE BOOKSHELF

*(Continued from page 10)*

wants his services as a waiter in spite of his songs, so the burden of support falls entirely upon Katie. The time comes early when the children must work to help, and after seeing Francie's physical and mental growth we are not at all surprised when she becomes the chief reader in a Manhattan press-clipping bureau at the age of fifteen. Her father's Irish tenor is no longer heard in Brooklyn taverns—brandy and melancholy have proved too much for him. Katie, who has a distinct lack of wisdom when it comes to her children's education, forces the reluctant Neeley to go to high school, while Francie, yearning for knowledge, foots the bill with her well-trained eyes. Francie's ambitions are realized, however, by the fortunate circumstance of her still pretty mother's remarriage to an admiring policeman some fifteen years her senior. The amazing Francie, who has never gone to high school, has taken enough courses in part-time college work to enable her to enroll at the University of Michigan with nearly a year's studies behind her. She is just sixteen years old when she leaves for Ann Arbor, on her first trip beyond the Hudson River.

The amusing incidents which lighten the burden of this poverty-stricken family are numberless;

only a few can be mentioned. There is the dealer in Christmas trees who at the last minute gives away all the unsold trees to children who can remain standing when he throws trees at them with all his might. But we strongly suspect that he really doesn't throw the trees so hard as he pretends. The first time Francie sees the ocean she is sadly disillusioned; not even she can romanticize the view from a leaky row-boat in a slimy inlet.

Among the colorful people in Francie's life is her mother's sister Sissy. Sissy has been married four times without a single divorce. Her explanation is amusing, if not altogether satisfactory from a legal point of view. A Catholic, she naturally does not believe in divorce; and since the ceremonies were performed by civil authority rather than by a duly ordained priest, they were not even marriages, were they?

By way of explaining her title, Betty Smith writes: "There's a tree that grows in Brooklyn. Some people call it the Tree of Heaven. No matter where its seed falls, it makes a tree which struggles to reach the sky. It . . . survives without sun, water and seemingly without earth. It would be considered beautiful except that there are too many of it."

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